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art for architecture's sake?

text

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photography

Bernd and Hilla Becher
Courtesy of Die
Photographische
Sammlung
/SK Stiftung Kultur

THE Architecture, Disciplinarity and the Arts symposium was organised by the Architecture, Theory, Criticism and History (ATCH) research group at the University of Queensland, run by John Macarthur and Antony Moulis, together with Andrew Leach who joined them last year and organised much of the symposium. The symposium ran for three days in a small room at the Institute of Modern Art (IMA) in Fortitude Valley, Brisbane (generously donated by director Robert Leonard) with about 40 people in attendance. Together with a long question time of an hour after every three speakers, the size of the room and the small number of people made it very different from most architecture or design conferences. The intellectual level of the symposium was high, without the speed dating aspect that one often sees at the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand (SAHANZ) meetings, where endless parallel sessions of short papers create

an occasionally disorientating cacophony of words. The symposium was deliberately, unapologetically academic and the intimate nature of the forum made the discussion rich and collaborative, with an active audience. The title of the symposium, 'Architecture, Disciplinarity and the Arts', reflects the connection that already exists between the art history and the architectural history community in Brisbane, with both groups regularly attending each other's functions.

A number of papers were concerned with what could be described as the 'modelling' of the discipline of architecture; that is, how we understand what architecture 'is', with the emphasis in the title of the symposium suggesting that the answer is 'art'. An example of this was the paper by Peter Kohane that discussed the 19th century architectural theorist James Fergusson's 'Principles of Architecture'. In his 1907 book *A History of Architecture: in All Countries from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* Fergusson proposed a general schema for the arts, which situated them in three hierarchical areas: Technic, Esthetic and Phonetic (Arts). The trades were all in the Technic category, landscape gardening was in the Esthetic, and music and painting in the Phonetic. In a bizarre diagram that looks like three slugs crawling across each other, architecture obviously straddled all three areas.

Papers by Darren Jorgensen on Wilhelm Worringer and by Deborah van der Plaats on William Lethaby also explored how architecture was modelled as a discipline in the arts – the words 'theory freak show' sprang to mind, as obtuse, exotic and downright weird versions of what architecture is (or was) were wheeled out.

Other papers by architectural historians dealt with the work of artists whose subject matter was either architectural or more broadly spatially relevant to architecture. Naomi Stead presented a paper on the work of the German photographic couple Bernd and Hilla Becher, whose black and white documentary photographic work catalogued German industrial elements such as blast furnaces and water towers. The rigour of the Bechers' documentary photography would seem to be the very definition of a typology study, but also has a strongly emotional content, which Stead suggested lends the photographs the quality of portraiture. Papers by Charles Rice on Thomas Demard's cardboard artwork *Grotto*, by art historian Rosemary Hawker on artist Callum Morton, and by Sandra Kaji-O'Grady on artists using serial techniques in the 1960s also explored either similarities in medium, subject matter or method in art as it might inform, or be informed by, architecture. At his associated public lecture, an impressive guest from the Ghent University in Belgium, Bart Verschaffel, gave a fascinating formalistic reading of the paintings of Claude Lorrain, to determine their embedded views on nature.

Perhaps the most obvious and also the most problematic category was where architects tried their hand at art, or vice versa. Antony Moulis discussed the paintings of Le Corbusier, suggesting that 'the architect's art was an 'art for architecture's sake' – the paintings seem to be an application of compositional techniques from architecture to another medium, a further test of his principles such



that they might be completely free of the strictures of an architectural ambition. A paper by Daniel Barber about the work of André Bloc in Iran dealt with his notion of the 'synthesis' project, where all the arts and design disciplines merged. In both his and Le Corbusier's case the ambition of the projects, and the successes of their other great projects, lead one to generously avoid judging the quality of the art produced in terms of art rather than architecture. This discomfort can be felt when one finds repackaged sketchbooks of designers that purport to house their inspiration, mining bad drawings for pearls. Though not entirely relevant to this category, Gevork Hartoonian in his paper proposed a re-reading of art historian Clement Greenberg, asking if it is possible to discuss architecture, or the art of architects in this case, 'autonomously' of its various contexts.

To bring the disciplinary modelling process inaugurated in the discussion of the 19th and early 20th century round to the present, a number of papers dealt with contemporary practices of architecture that diverge from what might once

have been thought to comprise the discipline. Another international guest, Mark Dorrian from the University of Edinburgh, discussed the Blur project by Diller and Scofidio where "architecture has become special effects". In an interpretation that made one consider how Reyner Banham might have taken this project, Dorrian questioned the project's true formlessness in the face of the substantial structural edifice required for its own invisibility. Verschaffel also discussed the changes to the practices of architecture in the face of Koolhaas' AMO projects, and questioned what happens to architecture once it loses its medium, building. Verschaffel suggests that the 20th century pursuit of freedom for art should not be transferred to architecture: "Architecture should behave, but art shouldn't." Another speaker, Craig Johnson, from a cultural studies background, discussed architecture as a phenomenon of words and of publishing, also through discussion of AMO/OMA.

The symposium made one think about the nature of the academic culture in architecture in Australia at the moment, in relation to how the universities are funded, and the impact this has had on the teaching, research and recognition of history and theory in architecture schools. As mass teaching has reduced the number of subjects, and then attempted to merge whatever subjects it can across disciplines, history and theory are the first chopped in the face of accreditation requirements. In research, the move from counting of papers to the Research Quality Framework (RQF) will be good for the recognition of designers and popular writing about architecture (both areas that have not been properly counted previously), but small forums of finer grained history will seem even more obscure.

Finally, in terms of institutional recognition of researchers, papers that contribute incrementally to the body of knowledge are not nearly as sexy as grants worth hundreds of thousands of dollars dedicated to technology. As these issues draw down on curricula, increasingly even design and history are being seen as separate combatants in an institutional war, rather than as complementary parts of a culture that should celebrate diverse pursuit of excellence in architectural design, just from different directions. There is no doubt that these are, if not anti, then non-history times, and that it is not architectural history alone that is feeling the brunt of them. Students undertaking the French Baccalaureate have almost completely abandoned the conventional humanities in favour of economics.

While the Federal Government seemingly wishes to embrace the teaching of history, some think that this reflects a desire to control how it is told rather than an enthusiasm for critical historical knowledge generally. Sitting in that forum, however, intimate as it was, and dedicated to an almost nerdy fascination with knowledge, one felt indulgent and decadent, and one learned stuff. Somehow outside the institutions, in a context of independent knowledge, a space for considering cultures of creativity was developed, even just for two days, that made all the other issues that are only the context of knowledge creation, the management of it, fade away **_ar**